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Experimental filter may be used on uranium in water

By Judy Fahys
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The Energy Department plans to use an experimental underground filter to strain uranium and other contaminants from Montezuma Creek east of Monticello, the site of a defunct uranium mill in the final stage of a Superfund cleanup.

Environmental officials already have spent about \$250 million cleaning up contaminated soil from nearby residents' yards and the 110-acre mill site and burying the mildly radioactive waste in a specially designed tailings landfill. Now, the Energy Department, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Environmental Quality want to spend \$1.5 million to deal with the contaminated water.

Their proposed cleanup plan is set for a public meeting tonight at 7 at the San Juan County Courthouse in Monticello.

So far, the filter -- called a permeable reactive barrier -- seems to be succeeding at cleaning up the contaminants, which taint the creek about a mile downstream of the former mill site, now a city park. Since a test filter was installed four years ago, all but one of the worrisome pollutants have declined.

"It has been working for the water going through it," said DEQ project manager Dave Bird. "The problem is it's not capturing all the water."

Besides uranium, the contaminants of concern include vanadium, manganese, molybdenum, nitrate, alpha and beta radiation, and selenium.

The DOE estimates the water will be fully decontaminated in 42 years, less than half the time federal law allows for projects of this kind.

Regulators say they also can limit exposure to the contaminated water by prohibiting well owners from using the contaminated aquifer and preventing the groundwater from being used in local homes.

A long-term monitoring plan also is in place.

A comment period on the cleanup plan continues through Jan. 15. Comments are being accepted at monticello_comments@GJO.doe

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